

[Building academic careers for a new era: Parenthood and sustainability in European business schools

Zuzanna Staniszevska*

ESCP Business School

Abstract

This paper argues that how European business schools accommodate parenthood will shape whether academic careers remain sustainable in the future. At stake is not only work-life balance, but the credibility of institutions that teach sustainability while claiming responsibility for the next generation of leaders. Drawing on interviews with academics who are also mothers and fathers, this paper shows that parenthood reshapes academic careers in ways that are more complex than the familiar narratives of the “motherhood penalty” and “fatherhood bonus” suggest. Motherhood can create structural constraints, reduce visibility, and slow down progression, yet it may also help define clearer priorities and stronger boundaries, and enable more focused work. Fatherhood, meanwhile, does not automatically confer a career advantage. Many fathers in this study described reducing travel, declining additional projects, or feeling unable to speak openly about caregiving responsibilities. Taken together, these findings suggest that parenthood creates additional career challenges for both women and men, although these challenges are experienced differently and remain shaped by gendered expectations around care. In response, business schools face a strategic choice: preserve outdated norms of total availability and risk losing talent, or redesign promotion timelines, workload expectations, and career paths around contemporary family life. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for building more sustainable, inclusive, and credible academic career paths.

Keywords: parenthood, academia, business schools, careers, sustainability

*Associate Researcher, ESCP Business School

ESCP Impact Papers are in draft form. This paper is circulated for the purposes of comment and discussion only. Hence, it does not preclude simultaneous or subsequent publication elsewhere. ESCP Impact Papers are not refereed. The form and content of papers are the responsibility of individual authors. ESCP Business School does not bear any responsibility for the views expressed in the articles. Copyright for the paper is held by the individual authors.

Rebuilding academic careers for a new era: Parenthood and sustainability in European business schools

Research background

Nearly 50% of academics in Europe are parents, yet academic careers remain designed for an idealized worker without caregiving responsibilities. At the same time, academic careers have become increasingly demanding and insecure in recent years. Across Europe, higher education systems have experienced intensified competition and rising performance expectations (Topalidou, 2025). Early-career researchers are often employed on fixed-term contracts and are expected to demonstrate high mobility and flexibility (Bonache et al., 2022). Unlimited working hours, international mobility requirements, and high pressure to publish and secure external funding have become normalized features of neoliberal academic work in Europe. While these conditions are widely discussed in relation to motherhood penalty, precarity, and research productivity (Baker, 2012; Lutter, M., & Schröder, 2020), less attention has been paid to how they shape sustainable careers for academic parents.

In this context, universities – and particularly business schools – should assume a clear role as institutional exemplars for sustainable careers. Specifically, as organizations that educate future leaders, managers, and entrepreneurs who will later shape organizations, labor markets, and societal norms, business schools are uniquely positioned to model how demanding professional careers can be balanced with parenthood. If business schools fail to demonstrate such compatibility within their own academic workforce, their legitimacy as forward-looking and socially responsible institutions amid demographic decline becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

Career sustainability and life-course perspectives in academia

This paper builds upon the growing body of literature on career sustainability, which conceptualizes careers as long-term processes shaped by the dynamic interaction of individual characteristics, contextual conditions, and temporal dimensions (De Vos et al., 2020). A defining feature of the career sustainability framework is its explicit integration of the person–context–time triad (Akkermans et al., 2020). The person dimension refers to individual resources, values, health, agency, and life circumstances, including family responsibilities. The context dimension encompasses organizational practices, labor market conditions, institutional norms, and policy environments. The time dimension highlights the fact that careers unfold across the life course and are shaped by timing, sequencing, and accumulation of experiences and opportunities.

This framework is particularly relevant for academic careers. Academia is characterized by extended periods of education and training, delayed employment security, and cumulative evaluation systems that reward uninterrupted productivity. As a result, events that affect the person dimension — such as parenthood — may interact with contextual constraints in ways that generate cumulative (dis)advantages over time. Career sustainability perspectives, therefore, offer a conceptual lens for understanding parenthood not as a single career interruption, but as a life-course transition whose consequences accumulate through institutional arrangements over time.

Parenthood penalties and (in)equalities in academia

The next section draws on the literature on gendered organizations (Acker, 1990), which shows how ostensibly neutral work structures are organized around masculine life patterns. In academia, this is reflected in ideas of excellence that reward scholars who can organize their lives around work. Care for others might be acknowledged, but only insofar as it does not disrupt academic work.

Within this framework, extensive research has documented the “motherhood penalty” in academia (Baker, 2012). Empirical studies consistently show that women experience slower promotion, reduced publication output, and higher attrition rates following childbirth (Lutter & Schröder, 2020; Morgan, 2021). These penalties are not limited to individual productivity effects but are embedded in evaluation practices, expectations of availability, and norms of academic excellence (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). By contrast, fatherhood has often been associated with a perceived commitment or stability advantage, sometimes described as a “fatherhood bonus” (Reddick et al., 2012).

Importantly, while women’s parental experiences have received substantial attention, men’s trajectories remain comparatively underexplored. Emerging studies suggest that fatherhood may also intersect with academic careers in consequential ways, particularly in contexts where norms of caregiving and leadership are changing (Bonache et al., 2022; Dickson & Dickson, 2021). Including both women’s and men’s experiences is therefore essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of how parenthood interacts with career sustainability in academia. Existing research indicates that parenthood can constitute a critical turning point in academic careers, particularly for women. However, much of this literature still conceptualizes parenthood as a discrete event or individual characteristic, rather than as a career-shaping process embedded in institutional arrangements, unfolding over time, and requiring active organizational support.

Study findings

The findings of this study show that parenthood in academia is more complex than the dominant narratives of the “motherhood penalty” or “fatherhood bonus” suggest. Many women recognized the structural costs of motherhood, including slower progression and reduced visibility. At the same time, several described motherhood as a turning point that led them to establish clearer priorities and stronger boundaries, and created a more sustainable relationship with work. Some noted that before having children, they had considered leaving academia, yet motherhood helped them remain by reducing perfectionist pressures and encouraging more selective engagement. The birth of a child became a moment of reflection, a time to redefine priorities. According to one of the interviewees, *“If it weren’t for the child, I probably would have left. It forced me to set boundaries.”* Another added: *“I stopped trying to prove to everyone that I could handle it.”* Instead of leaving academia, women as mothers decided to change how they operate within it by adopting new, healthier principles.

The experiences of fathers challenged assumptions of automatic career advantage. Many men reported reducing travel, declining additional projects, or stepping back from grant-related activities to be present at home. Several also described a lack of language and space to discuss fatherhood in academic settings. As one participant noted, *“Women have more space to express their emotions, feelings, and speak about their situation than men.”* Others emphasized the silence surrounding care in universities, observing that *“academia still too rarely shows its employees as people immersed in ordinary family life.”*

Men were also more likely to mention mental health pressures during the transition to parenthood, yet often felt less entitled to speak openly about them. One father admitted, *"I was definitely afraid to say that I would become a father for the third time,"* while another said he was *"waiting for a neutral moment"* to share the news, unsure it would be received with understanding. For some, simply being listened to was unusual and meaningful: *"Finally, someone listened to me, had time for me, and gave me space to talk about my experiences and emotions connected with fatherhood."*

Across both groups, participants often felt they became more productive after becoming parents, but through better prioritization, effective time management, and more strategic choices. These benefits were uneven, however, and depended heavily on how care was shared within households. Where care remained gendered, women continued to bear greater career costs. Overall, the findings suggest that it is not parenthood itself that shapes academic careers, but the wider configuration of resources, norms, and constraints surrounding it.

Conclusion: recommendations for rethinking parenthood, sustainability, and inclusivity in business schools

Business schools are well-positioned to lead change in this area, yet many still rely on career models built around uninterrupted work patterns, frequent travel, and expectations of continual responsiveness. These assumptions are increasingly misaligned with demographic change and contemporary norms around caregiving. From a career sustainability perspective, parenthood often changes how academics work rather than reducing their commitment or capability. Many parents develop clearer priorities, stronger boundaries, and more focused ways of working. Institutions that read temporary shifts in pace as lower ambition risk losing valuable talent and future leaders. Rethinking parenthood in business schools, therefore, requires aligning institutional practices with the lived realities of contemporary family life rather than with stereotypical assumptions about mothers as less committed or fathers as unaffected by care responsibilities.

In a context of declining fertility, aging populations, and global competition for talent, business schools that make parenthood compatible with academic success will be better placed to attract, retain, and develop strong scholars. Those that fail to adapt risk higher attrition, weaker diversity pipelines, and a widening gap between what they teach and how they operate.

The consequences of failing to adapt are substantial. Business schools may continue to lose talented women after childbirth, while fathers disengage or remain silent about care responsibilities. Over time, this may weaken future talent pipelines and deepen existing inequalities. It may also widen the credibility gap between what institutions teach about sustainability and inclusion, and how they organize academic work in practice.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for decision-makers at European business schools.

Rethink academic merit for sustainable careers

- Review promotion criteria that continue to reward uninterrupted output and permanent availability, as these standards often reflect life patterns less compatible with caregiving.

- Create room for slower or non-linear career trajectories without treating them as evidence of lower commitment (De Vos et al., 2020).
- Review how invisible work, including student advising, mentoring, program coordination, committee service, and pastoral care, is distributed, recognized, and rewarded, as these responsibilities often fall disproportionately to women and remain weakly valued in promotion systems (Acker, 1990; Baker, 2012).
- Reduce reliance on serial short-term contracts at career stages that often coincide with decisions about parenthood.
- Reconsider mobility expectations for postdoctoral scholars, where relocation functions as an informal test of commitment.
- Recognize that delayed family formation is often shaped by the uncertainty and precarity embedded in early academic careers, rather than by individual lifestyle choices.

Normalize caregiving within academic culture

- Build cultures in which staff do not feel pressure to hide children, care duties, or family constraints in order to appear serious and committed.
- Encourage senior academics and leaders to model realistic career paths that include family life.
- Design family policies and internal communications for fathers as well as mothers, rather than assuming men are unaffected by care responsibilities (Dickson & Dickson, 2021).
- Normalize uptake of leave, reduced travel, or temporary revision of priorities among men without reputational cost.

Close the gap between sustainability rhetoric and academic reality

- Recognize that Europe's fertility rate remains well below replacement level, around 1.34 in the EU according to Eurostat (2026), making long-term talent renewal a strategic concern.
- Align internal employment practices with what business schools teach about sustainability, responsible leadership, and social impact.
- Expand access to childcare support during conferences, major school events, and peak teaching periods.
- Review whether international travel expectations are necessary in all cases or simply inherited norms.
- Schedule key meetings within core hours rather than around assumptions of limitless flexibility.

References

- Acker, J. (1990). HIERARCHIES, JOBS, BODIES:: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender & Society: Official Publication of Sociologists for Women in Society*, 4(2), 139–158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124390004002002>
- Baker, M. (2012). Gendered families, academic work and the “motherhood penalty.” *Women’s Studies Journal*, 26(1), 11. <https://www.wsanz.org.nz/journal/docs/WSJNZ261Baker11-24.pdf>

Bonache, H., Carballo, V., Chas, A., & Delgado, N. (2022). Go the extra mile: a gender approach towards parenthood in early-career academics. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 31(1), 125–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2020.1836482>

Dickson, M., & Dickson, J. (2021). “Story time is my duty”: Expatriate academic fathers’ experiences of balancing their work and home lives. *Gender, Work, and Organization*, 28(6), 2235–2251. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12741>

Eurostat (2026). Fertility statistics. European Commission. Retrieved [26.01.2026], from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Fertility_statistics

Lutter, M., & Schröder, M. (2020). Is there a motherhood penalty in academia? The gendered effect of children on academic publications in German sociology. *European Sociological Review*, 36(3), 442–459. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcz063>

Morgan, A. C., Way, S. F., Hoefer, M. J. D., Larremore, D. B., Galesic, M., & Clauset, A. (2021). The unequal impact of parenthood in academia. *Science Advances*, 7(9), eabd1996. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abd1996>

Reddick, R. J., Rochlen, A. B., Grasso, J. R., Reilly, E. D., & Spikes, D. D. (2012). Academic fathers pursuing tenure: A qualitative study of work-family conflict, coping strategies, and departmental culture. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 13(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023206>

Topalidou, K. (2025, May 27). Key principles for attractive and sustainable academic careers. EUA - European University Association. <https://eua.eu/publications/positions/key-principles-for-attractive-and-sustainable-academic-careers.html>

van den Brink, M., & Benschop, Y. (2012). Gender practices in the construction of academic excellence: Sheep with five legs. *Organization*, 19(4), 507–524. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508411414293>